Optimism, Pessimism, and the Challenges of Leadership

In October 2020, more than six months into the COVID crisis, I wrote a website article titled "The Stockdale Paradox: A Lesson for Leadership in a Time of Crisis." As I am certain we all recall, it was a very challenging, polarizing period. Instead of coming together and supporting one another, we witnessed significant anger and mistrust over how the virus was being managed, emotions that intensified with the introduction of vaccines.

During that time, I conducted webinars for various groups (e.g., parents, educators, mental health and health care professionals, and financial and business advisors). In these presentations, beyond heightened anxiety, I heard a sense of pessimism, with people questioning whether the situation would improve. While many were hopeful that COVID would be contained at some point, many also wondered whether the fractures in our society and our relationships with others could be repaired.

Admiral James Stockdale was a Prisoner of War in Vietnam for more than seven years and endured repeated torture. Jim Collins, the author of *Good to Great,* asked Stockdale how he survived. He replied, "I never lost faith in the end of the story. I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into a defining event in my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade."

Stockdale observed that the prisoners who struggled the most and often didn't make it out of the camps were "the optimists," noting, "They were the ones who said, 'We're going to be out by Christmas.' And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they'd say, 'We're going to be out by Easter.' And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart."

In my 2020 article, I distinguished between "realistic" and "unrealistic" optimism, believing that Stockdale was referring to the latter. I cited research, including work by Heidi Grant, a social psychologist at Columbia University. She wrote, "Realistic optimists believe they will succeed, but also believe they have to *make success happen*—through things like effort, careful planning, persistence, and choosing the right strategies. They recognize the need for giving serious thought to how they will deal with obstacles. This preparation only increases their confidence in their own ability to get things done."

Grant emphasized the importance of "an honest assessment of the challenges that await you," alluding to research showing that unrealistic optimists who believed that *"success will happen to them"* experienced poor outcomes.

Many of you familiar with my work will see that Grant's perspective aligns with the concept of "personal control," which I have proposed as a core component of resilience.

Optimism and the Workplace

I was reminded of my 2020 article and other writings on leadership, optimism, and pessimism when I read a piece in the most recent issue of the *Harvard Business Review* titled "How Leaders Counter Pessimism in Trying Times." It was written by Michelle Gielan, a well-known researcher in positive psychology, and adapted from her new book, *Resilient Optimism: The Science of Sustaining a Positive Mindset in Tough Times.*

Gielan began the article by describing how, at a leadership session she ran the previous year, an executive approached during a break and said, "The strange thing is that the worst is behind us, but you'd never know it from the team. It's as if everyone is still bracing for impact." In discussing this issue with Gielan, she recognized that the problem was psychological at that point. News stories and social media accounts portrayed her industry as failing, and employees "were starting to believe that their efforts mattered less than they used to."

According to Gielan, many leaders were experiencing pessimism. She described a study she conducted with Arianna Huffington on how negative information affects the brain. They gave one group of people three minutes of negative news in the morning, then assessed their mood six to eight hours later, at the end of an ordinary workday.

The results of the study were very revealing. Compared with a control group that saw three minutes of neutral news, the people in the negative-news group were 27% more likely to describe the entire day as a bad one. The implication was that day after day of negative exposure—whether through world news, industry warnings, or team and personal setbacks—can erode well-being and performance until work starts to feel pointless.

Gielan explained that the "brain has a bias toward negativity," so threats to one's well-being have far more impact than reassurances. This contributes to the sense of having no control over the situation and to what psychologist Martin Seligman labeled "learned helplessness." At work, those trapped by a mindset of learned helplessness were less engaged and less successful.

In contrast, those who scored high on an optimism scale (Life Orientation Test-Revised) were "three times more likely to be highly engaged, 40% more likely to be promoted within 12 months, and five times less likely to burn out." Although these findings alone do not establish a cause-and-effect relationship, they parallel a growing body of research that has found optimism to be a significant psychological contributor to workplace success and well-being. Over the years, a number of my website articles have discussed the impact of optimism on our daily lives and our health, most recently this past April.

From Research to Application

From early in my career, whenever I've read research findings, I've considered how to apply them to my work as a psychologist and in my personal life. Gielan highlighted strategies for leaders to promote optimism in the workplace, but first she offered a cautionary note: "Here's the catch most leaders miss. You can't cure pessimism with a motivational speech or a good-vibes-only demeanor. Research shows that when people feel they must fake positivity, it leads to higher burnout."

Gielan added, "Instead, you need to build a culture of what I call *resilient optimism: the ability to see challenges clearly while believing that actions can still influence outcomes."* This definition is similar to Grant's and my definition of realistic optimism. Although I have used the term "realistic optimism" for years, I also like the term "resilient optimism."

To identify what a leader can do to nurture resilient optimism in their group or organization, Gielan studied effective leaders and found that "you accomplish this through a set of simple behaviors: modeling optimism, reframing stress, and highlighting progress" (please refer to Gielan's article for a more in-depth discussion of these three behaviors).

Model constructive behavior. I believe we are all aware that a leader's attitude affects their team and colleagues. Gielan wrote, "Through the brain's mirroring systems, we automatically pick up and reproduce the emotional states of the people around us. Leaders, in particular, have the power to shift the mood of their teams, not by pretending everything is fine or manufacturing cheerfulness, but through tone, body language, and small actions."

I appreciate the term "small actions," which parallels my emphasis in many of my writings and presentations, on the power of "micromoments" to have a marked impact on a person's life and an organization's emotional culture.

As an example of small actions, Gielan reported a study at the University of Pennsylvania in which managers were asked to "thank one group of fundraisers for their work—a brief genuine "We're grateful for what you do"—but say nothing to a comparison group." This "seemingly small gesture" (my term, which I frequently use) led the thanked group to make about 50% more calls the following week. Gielen noted, "What changed wasn't their skill or their workload; it was that they felt valued. Small repeated signals from a leader helped the team spiral upward."

Reframe your and your team's stress. This action involves a shift in mindset. Gielan cited a study of USB bank managers divided into two groups. One group was trained to "treat stress as a threat to reduce," and the other to see stress as something that sharpens attention, fuels quick thinking, and drives growth. Four months later, both groups were more stressed because of an industry-wide crisis. However, the group that learned about the positive aspects of stress "reported a 23% drop in stress-related symptoms such as headaches, backaches, and fatigue and logged better performance with higher satisfaction and less burnout."

Because reframing involves changing mindsets or perspectives, Gielan observed that leaders can teach their teams to reframe. One of the three main areas of "stress hardiness" theory, proposed by psychologist Suzanne Kobasa and elaborated upon by psychologist Salvadore Maddi, is viewing difficult situations as a challenge to learn from rather than something to fear and avoid.

Create and highlight the positives. Gielan described the brain as a "pattern maker that, in a noisy environment, strings negative dots into a discouraging story." This reinforces the belief that nothing I do will change the situation. To counter this sense of learned helplessness, Gielan recommended that leaders introduce positive dots. She offered examples of seemingly small gestures, such as: (a) send a text or email to an employee who is doing an excellent job, (b) lighten a load by asking someone on the team, "What small thing would make the next step easier?" and then providing it, and (c) reach out and reconnect with a colleague you haven't been in touch with for a long time.

Gielan concluded her thoughtful article with what she called "the leader's real job." She wrote:

> *Optimism won't fix a broken strategy or an unsafe workplace. But it can change what people do with a difficult reality—whether they disengage and wait, or stay in problem-*

solving mode long enough to find the next move. That's the leader's job: to move people toward a still realistic but more positive mindset that prioritizes agency and action over analysis.

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